SYED ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI

ISLAM IN A CHANGING WORLD

Academy
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FOREWORD

A seminar on ISLAM IN A CHANGING WORLD was held in January 1977 under the auspices of Aligarh Muslim University's Department of Islamic Studies in which, apart from scholars from all over the country, the Heads of the four leading Muslim institutions also participated. They were: Prof. A. M. Khusro, Vice-Chancellor, Muslim University, Aligarh, Maulana Qaari Mohammad Tayyab, Mohtamim, Darul Uloom Deoband, Maulana Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, Naazim, Nadwatul Ulema, Lucknow, and Dr. Masud Husain Khan, Vice-Chancellor, Jamia Millia, Delhi.

The inaugural address at the seminar was delivered by Maulana Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi on January 22, 1977. We now feel privileged to publish the address in English for the benefit of those who prefer to read about Islam and Muslims in that language.

M. Rabey Nadwi

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, members of the teaching staff of the University and distinguished visitors,

I am grateful to the organizers of the Seminar for according me the honor of inaugurating it. It is fitting that this Seminar is being held under the auspices of Muslim University, Aligarh, which has taken a bold and honest look at the changing world with special reference to Islam and Muslims in India. The movements and institutions which recognize the reality of change accept a solemn responsibility. It is not easy to acknowledge the need for change because it then becomes essential to keep a constant eye on the changes that take place around us, to examine and evaluate them objectively, and to ask ourselves whether we are really prepared to accept their challenge and adjust ourselves to them.

The scholars of the Muslim University and Nadwatul Ulema have thus accepted an important responsibility and, incidentally, a confluence of those who exercise power in the two institutions is being witnessed here today. They should analyze themselves before analyzing the times and decide if they are ready again to accept a legitimate change after having once undergone a transformation.

Change is the Law of Life

The subject of discussion today is ISLAM IN A CHANGING WORLD. It consist of two parts, ISLAM and the CHANGING WORLD, and I would like to take this opportunity to present my views clearly on both aspects of the problem so that we can give some thought to it in a free and frank manner.

So far as the changeableness of time, or, in the words of Iqbal, its fondness for the new is concerned it is generally supposed that there is no constancy or permanence in time; that time is simply another name for change and alteration. But it is

not so. Time is the combination of both change and permanence.

Whenever this state of equilibrium is disturbed, i.e., permanence over-rules change or change exercises an upperhand over permanence, it causes serious repercussions on society and civilization. There is a greater need for proportion here than in a chemical compound.

Time possesses the ability to change and it should change. Change is not a sign of weakness or imperfection, but the law of life. As Iqbal has said: "Life is ever-moving, ever-flowing, ever-young." A life which is devoid of the capability for growth and development is not life.

Resistance to change is also an inherent quality of time. The manifestations of change are plainly visible to us and we all know how greatly times have changed. But, in the ordinary course of things, we fail to appreciate the struggle time puts up in order to preserve its good and healthy attributes, its real nature and character. For it, a special kind of microscope is required. Take the river which offers an ideal example of movement. No two waves are alike. Yet, in spite of its passing waves, the river has been there for thousands of years with all its characteristics, its name, its direction and its channel. Tigris and Euphrates, Ganga and Jamuna are still what they were in ancient times.

Time is stationary as well as moving. Both of these qualities are essential. Without either of them, it cannot maintain its usefulness. In the same way, negative and positive forces are always at work in all living and non-living objects in the world. By their actions and reactions, these objects are fulfilling their destiny.

Religion is the Guardian of Life

As a follower and student of religion, I do not accept the position that religion should respond to every change. Nor will you accept this. It is not a thermometer whose function is merely to record the temperature. It is not a weather cock be defined in those terms. It cannot be reduced to a mechanical contrap-

tion. None of us would like it simply to operate as the recorder of the changes of the times. A revealed faith, or even a so-called religion, cannot tolerate that position.

Religion recognizes change as a reality and affords the fullest scope for the free play of things that are needed for a healthy and wholesome alteration. Religion marches hand in hand with life; it does not merely follow it. Its duty, also, is to discriminate and distinguish between healthy and unhealthy or correct and incorrect changes, between constructive and destructive trends. It has to determine whether an alteration is beneficial or harmful for mankind, or, at least, for its followers. While, on the one hand, it keeps abreast of the dynamic life, on the other, it acts as its guardian and custodian. It has to discharge the duty of superintendence and control as well. It is not the job of a guardian to support whatever his ward does, to uphold all his good and bad inclinations, and to set his seal of approval on everything his ward chooses to pursue. Religion does not possess only one seal, only one ink and only one hand. It is not for religion to fix its stamp of approval on all documents or deeds. It must discrimiate and pick and choose. First, it will examine and then pronounce its verdict. If a thing is wrong or harmful, religion will try to put it down, gently if possible but forcibly if necessary. If a document is considered injurious for mankind, religion will not only refuse to set its seal on it but will also strive to resist it. Herein lies the difference between eithics and religion. Religion regards it a duty and responsibility to check a wrong trend; ethic contents itself with indicating it.

Some Trials in the History of Religion

In the history of religion, we find some periods during which religion appears to have lost contact with life. However the fault was not with religion but its followers. It is not the religion that fails to keep pace with life, but, due to lethargy and indifference, its adherents fail to practice its high ideals and lofty values. The followers are left lagging behind while the caravan of life moves on. This subtle difference between religion and its

followers is generally overlooked and we do not bother to determine which of the two really is to blame. We are apt to couple them together. But if a critical and unbiased study is made, it is obvious that Islam as a Divine Faith was not responsible for this sorry state of affairs. There is nothing in Islam that prevents it from answering the needs of the practical world and solving its problems.

It is a common failing among men to blame someone or something other than themselves. When Muslims fail to find the answers to their problems in the light of the Qur'an and to work out a synthesis between the eternal laws of faith and the changing realities of the world, they begin to find fault with the Qur'an rather than themselves. They give the impression that the Qur'an is defective and imperfect because it does not provide a justification for their very whim, desire or need. In the words of Iqbal:

The creed of these slaves is that defective is the Book,
For it teaches not the Muslims the ways of servility.

Some people even go a step farther and try to subordinate the Qur'an to their waywardness, inclinations and ambitions. They offer interpretations that justify their perverted ideas and actions. Instead of casting themselves in the mold of the Qur'an, they try to cast the Qur'an in the mold of their thinking and acting.

In his inimitable style, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad has shed light on this failing, in his commentary of the Qur'an. He writes: "When they felt that they could not go along with the lofty heights of the Qur'an they tried to bring it down from them so that it could go along with their lowness."

Lack of Men of Ability

The periods of stagnation in the cycles of faith or the confusion, complexity and inner conflict among its followers are, in fact, the periods when there was a scarcity of men of worth and ability who could accept the challenges of the times and serve as forceful representatives of religion. In the annals of Islam,

whenever, faith has had effective representation, the Islamic Society and the Shariat have never been confronted with a crisis of confidence. Throughout the long and checkered history of Islam, we come across outstanding men who rose above the common level and put an end to the disorder of the day. They found solutions to the new problems and successfully discharged the responsibility of representing their faith and standing and speaking for it. Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Maalik, Imam Shafiee and Imam Ahmad bin Hambal were born at a time when Islam and the world needed them. By presenting the Islamic Canonic Law in a clear and concise manner, they solved the problems created by expansion in the dominions of Islam. Later, there appeared leaders of thought and action such as Imam Abul Hasan Ashari and Imam Ghazali who grappled with the challenges of their times and found appropriate solutions for them.

A Simple but Complicated Subject

The subject of Islam in a Changing World can become complicated if it is examined wholly from the angle of philosophy and logical reasoning. However, it is easy and simple if you, at first, understand the reality of time, that it is not changing in a way with which either a system of ethics or a school of thought can keep pace. One should try to grasp the significance of time and give it its proper place, but, at the same time, understand Islam and undertake a study of it in depth to see what eternal guidance has been furnished in the Qur'an, how it appreciates the changing character of life and gives the call to reflect and ponder. We should study and examine how successfully the Muslims of the early phase who had to face new idealogies and civlizations for the first time successfully fulfilled their duties.

To keep abreast of the Modern Age is nothing to be proud of as far as Islam is concerned. Islam can, in truth, guide the Modern Age and bring it to the right path.

Bent upon Suicide

The Modern Age is falling into an abyss of destruction. It is bent upon self-destruction and driving mankind to death. It is producing quantities of evidence against the human race in the Court of the Almighty, proving that man has no right to live. What destructive forces are at work? Through teachings preserved in the Qur'an—social as well as moral and pertaining both to individual and collective existence—Islam can not only fulfill the legitimate demands of the present time but can also save modern civilization from ruin and annihilation. The question is no longer one of keeping pace with the Modern Age; it is now a question of saving the Modern Age. What will be the fate of those who swear by the Modern Age, who sing its praises and hold seminars in its name? Where will they end up? Will their voices continue to be heard in this world where only the stomach and the carnal appetities are worshipped. Today, in the world and in our own country, only two realities are recognized: power and wealth. Can we engage in serious thought on anything in such an environment? Will people be in a mood to listen? Only one slogan is heard: make hay while the sun shines. Moral obligations, ethical values and spiritual ideals have no meaning. The talk of saving humanity is dubbed as nonsense. No one is ready to lend an ear to it.

The problem of saving the modern world is now more important than that of saving Islam. The world has become so inebriated that it is not prepared to listen to anything that is sober or earnest. Do not worry about Islam. It takes notice of every age and recognizes all just and lawful demands. No system is more fair and equitable than Islam. It has been deeply concerned with every cry of anguish. It has always appealed to the intellect and urged it to remain active and operating. There is a holiday for the Muslim University and the Arabic Madrassas. It may be on a Sunday or a Friday. But there is no holiday for the human intellect. Islam thought that men of learning should be self-sacrificing and ready to maintain the severest and austerest standards of living.

Misunderstandings

Many misunderstandings are caused by misinterpretation. Hazrat Ali has advised us to talk to people according to their level of understanding, to present transcendental truths in an acceptable way. It is not merely a matter of language but of mode of thinking and mode of expression as well. He then adds, "Do you want the teachings of God and His apostle to be confuted?" God and the Apostle are being rejected not because their precepts are against the realities of the times but because these are not presented in an attractive and easy-to-understand manner.

Islam commands its own place in the changing world. It will forfeit the claim if it makes an appeal for mercy. The world, on the other hand, can advance in the right direction under the guidance of Islam.

Religion and Civilization

At this stage, our attention, turns towards civilization. It is a Western notion. Many people imagine that Islam is the name of a civlization that no longer exists. Writers are fond of alluding to it as "the Legacy of Islam." Islam does possess a civilization, but it does not stand for an old and archaic civlization. We know that a thousand or five-hundered-year-old civilization has no validity in changing world. But religion is not merely the name of some moral values, a social or, cultural system, or school of architecture. It consists of transcendental truths, articles of faith and essential doctrines of belief, of a mutual relationship between the Deity and the bondmen, and of the eternal laws of existence.

If such is the scope of Islam, it is absurd to ask what will happen to it when the molds change. Will it be able to fit into them? Western intellectuals raise wrong issues and promote misleading controversies. However much life may change, there will always remain a place for the transcendental truths. The whole of existence must come under the superintendence of faith, otherwise we will fall prey to the same evils that are rampant in modern western society.

THE FOUNTAIN-HEAD OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES

Maulana Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi's Closing Speech

The last session of the Seminar was held on January 25, 1977 under the Presidentship of Prof. Mohammad Shafi, Pro Vice-Chancellor of the Muslim University, Aligarh. The closing speech was delivered by Maulana Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi. Among those present were Prof. A. M. Khusro, Vice-Chancellor, Muslim University, Aligarh, Mr. Badruddin Tayyabji and Dr. Masud Husain.

CLOSING SPEECH

Gentlemen,

It is most gratifying to me that the scholars of modern educational institutions are taking an interest in Islamic sciences. The present seminar is proof of this. Now, as the servants of these sciences, we can say with Iqbal:

Gone are the days when I was alone in the assembly,
Now many are the sharers of my secret here.

The treasures of the mind have never been the monopoly of any class. It should not be so. In Islam, you know that there is no hereditary priestly class. The concepts of priesthood and the ecclesiastics are peculiar to the Christian world and foreign to the world of Islam. If such terms are found in the writings of some of our scholars, it is solely due to blind imitation of the West. Nowadays the term *Rijaluddin* has become quite popular with Arab writers. It is being used in the same sense in which priesthood is used in the Christian world. Careful and prudent writers who aim at a correct presentation of Islamic thought and spirit have scrupulously avoided terms like this.

While expressing pleasure at the growing interest of contemporary seats of learning in Islamic sciences, I will, however, add that though there is no place for the clergy and priesthood in Islam, we have always had our experts and specialists. This is inevitable, for such a phenomenal expansion has taken place in the various branches of learning that it is no longer possible for anyone to be a master of everything. In Europe, too, the process of advancement began when people started to devote themselves to special branches of studies and scholars stopped being authorities on the entire range of knowledge. I suppose this principle is even now followed more in the West than in the East. There experts in any line unhesitatingly admit that a profession or field of study other than their own is not their domain. We should also limit our literary or intellectual endeavors to a particular subject or branch of study.

Standard of Perfection

I am proud to be your fellow-traveller and, taking advantage of this, I would like to offer a few suggestions. Perhaps you will agree that the standard of scholarship is going down in our midst. I had a similar feeling in the West and some scholars there, also, told me that a deterioration has appeared in the study of Oriental sciences. The current generation of scholars is lacking in industry and application. It is due to various causes, some of which are political, some economic.

Secret behind the Growth of Orientalism

There are some impelling forces behind every branch of learning. Such factors once took Orientalism to the top. With the exception of a few physical and social sciences, Oriental studies were held in the greatest honor in the West and the Orientalists and their writings enjoyed outstanding importance. At the back of it, a powerful factor was at work namely imperialism. We are glad that it is no longer operative. Fortunately or otherwise, the richest lands of the East were under the domination of the Muslims and the West was casting a covetous glance at them.

When imperialism wanted to establish new colonies. It was, therefore, necessary to study the national characteristics of those countries. The Orientalists served as the vanguard of the western imperialists. They received official patronage, vast funds were places at their disposal and they were received with honor in the courts of kings and heads of states. This factor has now ceased to exist. The other motive was of economic gain which, too, has lost its effectiveness. The economic structure has undergone such a transformation that the pursuit of Oriental studies is not as rewarding financially as it used to be.

Dedication

The spirit of dedication, also, is not a strong quality among the scholars of our time. The love of learning has weakened as well as the capacity for hard work. I am not singling out any col-

lege or university, this is my general observation. The single-minded devotion which distinguished scholars of the past is not found these days.

In Nawab Sadr Yar Jung Maulana Habibur Rahman Sherwani's *Ulema-i-Salf,* which he wrote here in Aligarh, we read how passionately devoted to study and research the scholars of those days were, and what a marked deterioration has taken place. Why? The causes are related to politics, economics, literature and ethics alike. It is neither possible nor necessary to discuss them here. This much, however, is evident: that the love of learning which transcends everything, and makes one indifferent even to such needs as food and dress, is now rare, if not extinct. Take the example of Maulana Lutfullah of Aligarh. His interest in his work was overwhelming. Among the European scholars, there was Lane whose Arabic Lexicon is regarded as indispensable not only by English students of the Arabic but also by the Arab scholars. I have heared that when he was working on the Lexicon in Cairo, he did not leave his apartment for months. He had no idea where the market place was, nor did he care to go and see the Pyramids. You can call this dullness or want of good taste if you like. But if you examine the history of the materpieces of art and learning, you will find that their creators or writers lived in a world of their own. Their work was their passion. They had no time or inclination for anything else.

Literary Figures of Recent Days

When Maulana Shibli decided to write on the Library of Alexandria, the Muslim students in the Universities were made the target of the jeering remark, "Ah, yes! You belong to the religion and the community whose Caliph burned down the Library of Alexandria." It was on everybody's tongue. People who saw this happen are still alive. They say that they did not know where to hide their faces or what answer to give. The story was that when Hazrat Omar was informed that there was a library in Alexandria which was full of philosophical works, he replied that if those books confirmed to the Qur'an they were

redundant, and if they were opposed to it, they should be burned. It was decided that the books were contrary to the Qur'an and the whole library was burned down without even opening the books. This is a pure fabrication but even a historian like Toynbee has had a hand in keeping it alive. Commenting on the change in the alphabet introduced in Turkey by Ataturk, Toynbee remarks that in present times the burning down of the library of Alexandria would not have been necessary. Only the change in the alphabet was enough. Allama Shibli exploded the myth forever and now it does not befit an educated person to say that the Library of Alexandria was set on fire on Hazrat Omar's orders during his Caliphate. He has furnished irrefutable evidence to show that the library had been destroyed by fire long before the Caliphate of Hazrat Omar.

Similarly, Allama Shibli took up the question of *Jazia* and discussed it so thoroughly that nothing was left for the future scholar to add. His *Sher-ul-Ajam* is regarded as a remarkable piece of study and research even in Iran. In his *Literary History of Persia* Professor Brown says that if he desired to learn Urdu it was only to enable him to study *Sher-ul-Ajam* directly. It was all due to the total dedication of scholars like Allama Shibili.

Allama Sulaiman Nadwi, whose main subjects were the Qur'an, the biography of the Prophet and the history of Islam, wrote a book on Omar Khayyam which won the admiration of the literary circles of Iran as well. In the same way, his *Arab-o-Hind Ke Talluqat* is a monument of industry and research.

I will also mention *Nuzhat-ul-Khawatir* written by my father, Maulana Abdul Hai. It is in Arabic, consists of eight volumes and deals with over 4,500 men of eminence of India. He decided to compile it at the beginning of the 20th Century when there were few facilities in our country for learning Arabic or writing it. It took him about 25 years to complete it and it is considered even in Europe to be the most respected source book of its kind. Again, his *As-Saqafatil Islamia Fil Hind* contains a complete history of the Arabic sciences and syllabi in India and a detailed description of books and manuscripts left behind by the Indian

scholars. It was published in 1957 by the Royal Academy of Arts and Letters of Damascus and I have personally heard that Syrian scholars speak highly of it.

Learning is its own Reward

In the past, an individual used to accomplish the work of whole academies. Now, big societies and institutions have been established but their output is, on the whole, not very encouraging. They are doing little original work.

The standards of scholarship must be raised. Learning is toil as well as fruit, thirst as well as water, hunger as well as food.

One should be so deeply devoted to his work that he regards it as its own reward, not as the means to the chairmanship of his department in one university or another.

Present-day scholars are in a hurry to collect the harvest. Their main concern is fame, promotion and remuneration. A large part of their energy is spent in the pursuit of these objectives. Material gain is their motivation. You have heard of many isms; now a new ism is becoming popular in our educational institutions. It is careerism.

Thirst for Knowledge should not be a Passing Phase

Another point is that interest in literary activities should not be short-lived. A subject for a seminar should not be chosen, chewed hurriedly and then thrown out like a cudding animal. There is neither a commitment to the theme nor an enduring attachment to it. Once the seminar is over, we wash our hands of the whole thing. Says Iqbal:

The goal of Art is the flame of immortal life,
Not a spasm or two that vanish like sparks.

Springs of Islamic Studies lie in Faith

You may, of course, read papers on the need for *Ijtehad* (i.e. exertion) in Islamic sciences. We all agree with this. It is a complicated subject. But I shall point out that as far as Islamic

sciences are concerned, many of its origins are embedded in faith. It is their main spring-head. Our attitude towards them should, therefore, be different than that of the Orientalists. It should not be purely academic, that we merely discuss them, without any sense of commitment. We should believe in them if they are related to articles of faith, and, to an extent, cultivate them in our practical lives.

In my childhood, I learned that ten maunds* of wisdom were needed for a maund of knowledge; otherwise one could not derive a real benefit from learning nor use it properly. I will make an improvement on this and say that piety should also be included in some proportion with research. We cannot subject knowledge to a post-mortem examination like a dead body. It will not be fair. Criticism should be free from scorn, bitterness and ridicule.

Those who are conscious of the responsibilities of study and research and of the changeability of ideas and notions never present their views in a dogmatic or authoritative manner. They do not expound a theory as if it was the last word on the subject. Their position should be that they have arrived at such a conclusion which at that moment seems correct. At yesterday's session, Mr. Badruddin Tayyabji who was presiding over it told a speaker whose time was up not simply that his time was over but that he was "afraid" that it was so. We can learn a lot from this. We must exercise restraint in our thought and learn to show respect to learning as well as to the person who devoted his time and energy to it.

Importance of Arabic Language

The importance of the Arabic language is fundamental. One cannot do any work on any Islamic science without acquiring proficiency in it. Scholars who do not know Arabic are prone to commit shocking errors while writing on the Qur'an, the Traditions or Islamic studies.

*[an Indian unit of weight.]

A friend told me that once a gentleman who had translated the Qur'an into English was speaking at a seminar in Delhi. The well-known Arab scholar Ayesha bint Shaati, also happened to be present. She requested him to speak in Arabic upon which he unashamedly said that he did not know that language. "How, then, can you translate the Qur'an?" asked Ayesha in wonder. On returning, she wrote a series of articles in *Al-Ahram* of Cairo on her strange experience and remarked, "I saw something of the wonders of the world and it was that a gentleman had translated the Qur'an and he was ignorant of the Arabic language."

You can easily obtain a working knowledge of the Arabic language and thus save yourselves from such errors. The Arabic madrassas will extend their fullest cooperation to you.

Avoid Creating Confusion

Some people express their views in a hurry, and, then later, they retract them. No doubt they perform their duty but what about the persons who may have departed from the world having been led astray by such views? It becomes a serious affair when these opinions pertain to belief and faith. We should, therefore, be patient before expressing our views, particularly when they belong to the realm of faith. We should think them over again and again, scrutinize them, place them before the experts and wait for their judgment. It is only then that these views should be published. This is an age of confusion and man is easygoing by nature. Modern civilization, the rapid pace of scientific advancement, and the ever-increasing rise in the standard of living are tending to make man more ease-loving and susceptible to confusion. We should, therefore, refrain from saying things that may add to the mental turmoil of the people.

When the Arabs were defeated by Israel in 1967, I said, in the course of an interview, that the responsibility of it lay in no small measure with the skeptics among our intellectuals who had shaken the moral and mental foundations of the youth and thrown all the traditional values into disarray.

ISLAM
AND
THE WEST

SYED ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI

This paper was read in the seminar held in the Oxford University on 22nd July, 1983 to discuss 'Islam and the West'. The seminar, presided over by Dr. D. G. Browning, of St. Cross College, Oxford, was attended by a considerable number of professors, scholars and students of Islamics, besides several scholars from Pakistan and certain Arab Countries, who had been invited to express their views on the subject. As the seminar was convened to cosider the establishment of an Islamic Center at Oxford, this paper seeks to bring out the need and importance of such an institution in that educational center of U.K.